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INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 9610

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1554

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 6966

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 5433

RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 6468

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 000982

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/17/2019

TAGS: PGOV KJUS KDEM ASEC TH

SUBJECT: LEADING ANTI-THAKSIN ACTIVIST SONDHI SHOT IN BANGKOK

REF: A. BANGKOK 907 (LARGE RED RALLY)

1B. 07 BANGKOK 15 (BOMBINGS)

Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, reason: 1.4 (b and d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

11. (SBU) Unidentified gunmen shot a leading "yellowshirt" political activist in Bangkok in the early morning hours of April 17. As of mid-day, the victim, Sondhi Limthongkul, was recovering from surgery. Sondhi previously led protests against former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra but maintained a low profile after the December 2008 occupation of Bangkok's airports. In an unrelated development, the authorities released a suspect in a recently-alleged assassination plot against a Privy Councillor.

12. (C) Comment: It is premature to speculate about the perpetrators of the Sondhi shooting, but the attack may well be connected to the recent mob actions in Bangkok. The ambush, more sophisticated than a typical Thai contract killing, will likely heighten political tension and make the RTG reluctant to lift the state of emergency in Bangkok in the near future. Following an April 17 cabinet meeting, PM Abhisit announced that the state of emergency would remain in effect for now.

13. (C) Comment, continued: Premeditated political violence in Bangkok, particularly when directed at powerful figures, has often taken the form of small and ineffective bombings -- ref B lists a number of such bombings that targeted Thaksin's foes. The attack on Sondhi represents a significant escalation of tactics. End Summary and Comment.

AMBUSH

14. (SBU) Between 5:00 and 6:00 a.m. on April 17, unidentified gunmen ambushed Sondhi Limthongkul as he traveled by car to a Bangkok television studio for a regularly-scheduled broadcast. Sondhi and his driver were wounded and hospitalized. The media reported in the afternoon of April 17 that doctors removed a bullet from Sondhi's head, and that Sondhi was conscious and able to speak.

15. (SBU) The media reported that at least two assailants in a truck fired on Sondhi and fled the scene. Based on shell casings retrieved from the scene, the authorities believe that the gunmen used M-16 and AK-47 assault rifles.

According to at least one media report, the authorities also found an unexploded M-79 grenade at the scene.

¶ 16. (C) Sondhi, a media mogul, became a leading critic of Thaksin and co-founded the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). The PAD pushed for then-Prime Minister Thaksin's ouster in 2005-6 and then protested against pro-Thaksin administrations that held power in 2008. During PAD's 2008 protest, its supporters, under Sondhi's leadership, occupied the Government House compound for three months and closed Bangkok's airports for a week. Contacts have told us that Sondhi privately told other Thais that Queen Sirikit directly supported his efforts. In advance of a recent application for a U.S. visa, Sondhi requested expedited procedures for his appearance at the Embassy, citing concerns for his security.

PRIVY COUNCILOR ALLEGEDLY TARGETED

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¶ 17. (C) In a separate development, the authorities released a Navy Captain, Chakkrit Sekhanant, who had been detained in connection with the alleged plot to assassinate Privy Councilor Charnchai Likitjitta (ref A). A high-ranking police official told us that the police working on this case appeared to have done sloppy work, which (for him) cast doubt on whether the alleged assassination plot was genuine.

JOHN